



50 years of *Higher Education*: a critical reflection and thoughts on an evolving agenda

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Abstract

This introduction to the 50th anniversary special issue of *Higher Education* recounts the history of the journal and reflects on the evolution and expansion of the journal and the field. Higher education studies is an object-oriented field that combines academic explanations with practical interventions. The journal takes an agnostic approach to disciplinary frameworks, theories, and methodologies and an eclectic and inclusive approach to topics. It began in 1972 with a preoccupation with the nature and implications of mass higher education systems, including internationally comparative analyses, and with a focus on policy and planning. Most of the earlier themes of research in the field have continued to the present, but as mass higher education systems have spread across the world, so has the journal's author list and editorial group. Higher education studies remain biased to the Anglophone and Euro-American worlds in their topics, theorizations, and author lists. Between 1996 and 2018, the USA and other English-speaking countries accounted for about 70% of authorship in the six journals with the highest impact factor. However, in *Higher Education*, that proportion was just over 45%, indicating some progress in the journal's efforts to pluralize, partly through the growth of papers from China. The introduction looks forward, anticipating growth in contributions from the global South, and further inquiry into the purposes of higher education and into its relations in social context. Finally, the introduction discusses the 50th anniversary papers that follow, contributed by twelve present and past editors of the journal.

Keyword Higher education; Higher education studies; International higher education; Academic publishing; Anglophone bias; Purposes of higher education

Higher Education published its first issues in 1972. In 2022, the journal therefore marks its 50th anniversary, which affords an opportunity to reflect upon the past and look to the future. This special issue both celebrates the journal and offers a critical retrospective and forward-looking assessment of the field of higher education studies. Today, the field of higher education is well established globally. But in 1972, it was a nascent multidisciplinary field with a budding interest in a number of countries. The journal (full title: *Higher*

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Education: The International Journal of Higher Education Research) was established to address the complex challenges brought about by growing participation of the youth cohort in higher education. Its initial purpose was to exchange ideas and experiences about higher education planning, focused on ensuring that expanding systems would maintain social relevance. At the time, only 10% of young people globally went on to higher education after compulsory schooling (World Bank, 2022). This ratio was designated the global gross tertiary enrollment ratio (GTER). In the UK, where *Higher Education* was based, the GTER registered at 15%, the threshold for what Trow (1973) described as the transition between elite and mass systems. *Higher Education's* pragmatically minded founders shared with Trow an understanding that high levels of participation have the potential to profoundly transform higher education sectors and the societies to which they belong.

The founders of the journal knew that although higher education was (as it still is) a sector relevant to government planners and bureaucratic administrators, it was (and is) also central to social organization and is an object in itself for academic inquiry. Research and scholarship, with capacities for both abstraction and empirical precision, deepen and advance knowledge. Associations and publications established for the pragmatic purposes of improving policy and administration often come to be preoccupied with research and scholarship because of the richer possibilities for progress. In the case of *Higher Education*, this did not take long. Quickly, the journal shed the mission of being a bureaucrats' compendium and took on an academic character. Within the first few issues, lively scholarly conversations and debates flourished, and before long, the journal abandoned its explicit mission to inform planning.

From the outset, the journal aimed to set the stage for academic exchange. Clark Kerr, who had served as President of the University of California and was chair of the Carnegie Commission of Higher Education, wrote the journal foreword, arguing that practical problems were also intellectual ones. "Newly modernizing nations," Kerr asserted, "look to higher education as an important aspect of the process of modernization, and nations entering the post-industrial society find themselves moving rapidly from the elite systems of the past to the mass higher education of the future with the manifold problems and possibilities associated with this historic shift" (Kerr, 1972, p. 1). An unfolding history of higher education demanded specialized, systematic examination for it to be explained and to be understood. The knowledge created by higher education researchers could both inform the work of system planners and higher education institution (HEI) leaders and help to better understand the role of higher education in a changing society.

Founding of the journal

From the start, *Higher Education* took an international outlook, which sets it apart from existing journals in the field. For example, *The Journal of Higher Education*, which predated *Higher Education* by several decades, was (as it remains) dedicated to the context of the USA. To support its growth, utility, and sustainability, *Higher Education* set out to develop knowledge about higher education as the sector expanded worldwide. The journal was edited jointly by AM Ross, whose entrepreneurial efforts led to the journal's

founding, and Gareth Williams.¹ In the inaugural editorial, Ross explained the need for building an international scholarly literature in the field. “The explosion in knowledge and in numbers, as well as the rapidly changing view of what higher education is and how it should be organized” required “a means ... for sharing the wisdom, ideas, insights, experiences and, perhaps, also resources which are, at present, too often restricted to one society” (Ross, 1972, p. 5). Ross was a former school headmaster who later became a Professor of Education at Lancaster University. Lancaster was a new university in the north of England. It was established in 1964 as part of the higher education sector’s expansion in the UK. In the post-war decades not only did more school-leavers go on to a higher education in the UK, but the array of universities expanded beyond the ancient ones in Oxbridge and Scotland, and the Victorian Red Bricks that preceded the twentieth century’s middle decade’s boom.

Ross used the journal as a launching point for building an international program in higher education studies at Lancaster University, a new field emerging in response to the realities experienced in the UK and many other countries, at a new university that embodied precisely the social and educational reality that the journal’s founders hoped to examine. The journal had a practical orientation, at least at the very start. While so-called mode 2 knowledge production would not be theorized for another two decades (Gibbons et al., 1994), Ross and Williams arranged scholars and ideas in the journal to address emerging time-sensitive, practical challenges that were shared across national borders. In doing so, editors of the journal also helped to establish a cross-border community of scholars. The journal project included a planned division of labor. Ross handled UK papers, and Williams managed all papers on planning, while additional co-editors managed topical paper submissions from the USA and Europe.

Ross designed the platform and managed the journal for years. He called on Kerr to establish the intellectual agenda with his foreword to the first issue of the journal in 1972. Kerr had recently been forced out of the role of the President of the University of California by then Governor Ronald Reagan. Ross would have been aware that California’s “Master Plan” was influential and seen to some extent as a template model for modern higher education outside of the USA (Marginson, 2016). In the foreword, Kerr set out to identify a research agenda for *Higher Education* and for the field of higher education studies more broadly. The former university President identified a set of seven problems as central to the field:

1. Faculty authority questioned and challenged by students, staff, and the state.
2. Increased autonomy of HEIs, coupled with heightened politicization, generates tension between politics and objectivity in mission fulfillment.
3. The necessity of re-examining traditional financing approaches considering the debate on the appropriate level of public versus private contributions.
4. New programs and institutions disrupting incumbents and overall system organization.
5. Pressure for increased social relevance in the curriculum and educational functions.
6. The coming “fourth technological revolution” and the role of electronic technology induced change in teaching and research.
7. The meaning of higher education becoming a truly international community.

¹ Many thanks to Gareth Williams for sharing the history of Higher Education as well as his recollection of the individuals involved, upon which we have relied.

Although Kerr did not spotlight teaching and learning as a vital problem for research, the first issue contains an article on transdisciplinary teaching and the organization of knowledge. Topics related to teaching and learning, and the structure of knowledge, were present in the journal from the start and remain so. Kerr's identification of higher education as the first "international community" expressed the need for international research into relevant problems in higher education. This approach neither mandated nor excluded the comparative method. From Ross and Kerr, we can see that the journal established the twin purposes of international research into higher education as being to share knowledge but also to identify implications for application to the practical world of higher education. As a field of study, higher education uses inquiry into higher education as a viewpoint from which to study social organization, and to generate actionable insights for the practitioners and policy makers that manage HEIs.

The journal was also object-oriented and welcomed contributions from disciplines. An object orientation means that the field is organized around the study of HEIs, students, the curriculum, and so on, rather than being organized epistemologically like the social science disciplines. The field's core interest was not in subjects of theory or method but in higher education itself, including non-university higher education. In other words, the field of higher education studies, and the journal *Higher Education*, does not primarily seek to develop generalized theories of the social world or to advance research methods, so much as it is interested in understanding higher education, often with an eye toward improved teaching and institutional management. Most of the attention in the journal goes to the university sector, but research into vocational, polytechnic, community college and similar education is also a feature of the journal and the field.

The journal over time

Reflecting the multidisciplinary field, *Higher Education* is intellectually omnivorous. Topics, methods, and questions have pluralized, but most of the general problems outlined by Kerr above still preoccupy the journal today and suggest a certain continuity in the field. Scholars have taken a more global focus since the 1990s, but the journal recognized international comparison at least as important from the outset. Scholarship on teaching and learning has expanded. So has research on graduate outcomes, stratification, and the conceptual analysis of higher education in society. Research about contexts beyond Anglo-American systems of higher education has grown, and, most notably, scholarship from China has exploded in volume and quality. The use of the English language allows *Higher Education* to maintain an international conversation but keeps work from some parts of the world on a separate track and contributes to "othering" research published in different languages as outside of the international literature. As a monoglot journal, even for abstracts, the journal does not engage directly with scholarship in Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and other scientific languages. And as Carolina Guzmán Valenzuela outlines in this special issue, while the geographic scope of the journal has expanded, it remains at least semi-Anglo-centric and is notable for relative absences in scholarship from sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America.

The journal was established and continues as both scholarly and empirical and is epistemologically plural. It has not embraced a dogmatic view on social scientism and is neutral on the battles about evidence, causality, and replication. Nor did the journal ever take a marked cultural turn and adopt a strong constructivist stance or take an explicit normative

or activist position like that of counter-hegemonic and subaltern scholarship. All this work sometimes appears in the journal, which is arguably more inclusive than most outlets in the social sciences. *Higher Education* has mostly remained disciplinary, theoretically, and politically agnostic. The journal welcomes object-oriented scholarship and research that spans the field. As the editorial group has expanded, successive appointments have sought to reproduce this broad field coverage through the mix of comprehensive, specialist, and regional knowledge within the group.

The journal was first published by Elsevier, which owned *Higher Education* from 1972 to 1985. In 1986 and 1987, it was published by Martinus Nijhoff and from 1988 onwards by Kluwer Academic Publishers. Since 2005 (and following its merger with Kluwer), Springer, now Springer Nature, has published *Higher Education*. The founding editorial group led by Ross and Williams ran the journal until 1985, when the editorship was transferred to Grant Harman, and then at the University of Melbourne in Australia. Harman later moved to the University of New England, also in Australia. Harman remained in the post until 2010, a period of 25 years, the longest tenure by an editor at the journal. In fact, Harman edited *Higher Education* for a period equal to half of the journal's existence.²

When Harman stepped down, Jussi Välimaa at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland became the editor-in-chief, assisted by an expanding group of coordinating editors. From 2013, Välimaa was joined by Simon Marginson, who moved that year from the University of Melbourne to University College London in the UK. Marginson was the sole editor-in-chief in 2018 and 2019. In 2020, Jennifer Case, working at Virginia Tech in the USA after spending years at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and Brendan Cantwell from Michigan State University in the USA, joined Simon Marginson, now at the University of Oxford in the UK. Together, Cantwell, Case, and Marginson are joint editors-in-chief of the journal. They work with a team of coordinating editors: Paul Ashwin (Lancaster University, UK), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway, University of London, UK), Carolina Guzmán Valenzuela (Universidad de Tarapacá, Chile), Hugo Horta (University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR China), Sioux McKenna (Rhodes University, South Africa), Terhi Nokkala (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Cláudia Sarrico (ISEG Lisbon School of Economics & Management, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal), and Wenquin Shen (Peking University, China). Jelena Brankovic (Bielefeld University, Germany) is the books editor.

The expanded editorial roster reflects the dramatic growth in the journal over these 50 years. In 2009, there were 447 submissions to the journal, and the acceptance rate was almost 20%. Ten years later, in 2019, there were 1463 submissions, and the acceptance rate was 9%. In 2022, the journal is on track to receive approximately 1600 submissions, with an acceptance rate below 10%. The publisher and editors have decided to progressively expand the journal's pages to accommodate the growing number of good quality submissions emanating from the field. The point is not to become ever more exclusive but to include as much of the good work that contributes to our understanding of the field as possible. *Higher Education* now publishes 12 issues across two volumes and more than 120 articles per year.

The growth of the journal reflects the growth of the field of higher education studies. The total number of journals, articles, and citations in higher education studies has increased considerably since the 1970s. The field now includes 41 core journals. *Higher Education* is one of six journals that consistently attracts the most citations and is ranked

² Thanks to Yoka Janssen from Springer Nature for the information on publisher history.

in the upper strata of all education journals on the basis of citation metrics. Between 1996 and 2018, the USA and other English-speaking countries accounted for approximately 70% of authorship in all the “top-six” (as determined by impact factor) journals, but just over 45% in *Higher Education* (Kwiek, 2021). Along with *Studies in Higher Education*, *Higher Education* is one of only two fully internationalized journals. Across the field, Anglo-American dominance in publishing has declined since the start of the twenty-first century (Kwiek, 2021; see also Guzmán Valenzuela, this issue). By publishing articles from a wide set of countries, including a growing volume of cross-national collaborative papers, *Higher Education* is a significant contributor to field-level internationalization.

The worldwide scope of higher education studies presents a challenge. In many ways, the provision of post-secondary education remains a national endeavor, even though research is globalized. *Higher Education* is one part of the field of higher education studies, which grew apace during the second half of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first and which continues to awkwardly aim to cover the national and global character of the field. Today, there are scholarly and professional associations on every continent except Antarctica. Research literature published in English is often considered “international,” but much of it, especially from the USA, is nation bound. The geographic expansion of the field of higher education studies requires that the field adapt and take in new perspectives. Teichler (2013) argues that the Consortium of Higher Education Research (CHER), a European research association, was founded in part as a counterbalance to the dominance of North American perspectives. More recently, CHER-A, for Asia, was founded to “advance the study of the globalization and Easternization of international higher education.”³ The point here is that no single scholarly venue or association can (or should) itself define the field, which is open and constantly changing.

Expansion of the field of study followed expansion of higher education as a transnational social field. In 2020, the world GTER exceeded 40% (World Bank, 2022), and dozens of countries had crossed the 50% threshold that had been theorized as “universal” by Trow (1974) at the time of the journal’s foundation. The field has become internationalized, but the future is less certain. Early authors and editors of *Higher Education* correctly anticipated the expansion of higher education in most countries for the foreseeable future. Participation rates are now high in most upper- and middle-income countries, and worldwide participation continues to grow, but the rate of growth may slow in future. Resources to support growth are not guaranteed and could contract. Evidence of contraction is already evident in the USA, where high rates of participation were first achieved. Other regions may not reach higher levels of participation in the medium run. Social and economic challenges might stand in the way of dramatically expanding participation rates in younger populous South Asian and sub-Saharan African countries. High costs, concerns about declining individual returns, disruptive technologies, and eroding social cohesion are even straining systems in some high-income countries. When the social divide between degree holders and non-degree holders becomes translated into political tensions, higher education might no longer appear as a universal good.

³ See <https://chera.edu.hku.hk/about-us-2/>.

The special issue

The challenges facing higher education that were identified by Kerr in 1972 persist to this day, but in a starkly different context. Higher education has ascended as a global institution, but continues to be subject to national policy and politics, and a future of expanding participation with growing resources to match is not guaranteed. Disillusionment about the economic contribution of higher education and graduate employability has engendered skepticism about the participation imperative in the USA, the UK, and other countries where a neoliberal style transactional understanding of education prevails. India, poised to be the world's most populous country, has recently set out an ambitious agenda to re-design the higher education system and dramatically expand participation to 50% by 2035, but realizing the vision will be a challenge in a resource-constrained nation with other pressing national priorities. Climate change and the inevitable human displacement it will cause are another source of uncertainty for both the sector and field of study. The continuity of the problems that the field of higher education studies is prepared to take up does not have to be an indication of stagnation. Instead, the continuity of problems affords the opportunity to re-frame the field and establish a renewed agenda for the journal.

The objective of this 50th anniversary special issue is thus to assess the field of higher education research and scholarship through the experiences and perspectives of the journal. Of course, the field of higher education studies is not defined by the journal *Higher Education*. But the journal is a meaningful constituent part of the field and a suitable venue for both retrospective stock tacking and prospective agenda-setting. To that end, the collected articles in this special issue ask: What problems preoccupy the field, and have they been addressed? Each article also ventures into specific answers to these broad questions.

Higher Education editors are active scholars and researchers in the field, with varying disciplinary backgrounds, topical expertise, and epistemological positions. Editors work in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. As a group and individually, editors are also exposed to a constant stream of research in the field, some of which is published by the journal and most of which is not. This collection of papers from scholars and editors is intended to reflect and advance scholarship in the field and to envision problems and approaches that might be taken up in the near future. The 50th anniversary issue of *Higher Education* extends beyond the sort of empirical work and bounded scholarship common to regular journal articles. The special issue is an opportunity to take a step forward from current research programs to consider meta-themes and topics and engage in original theorization that can open the next 50 years in the journal.

A notable feature of this special issue is that each article takes in the sweep of publications across the 50 years of this journal—but each with a slightly different approach to conducting this review, each evolving in the context of trying to do justice to a particular theme. The range of approaches is itself instructive, showing that simple generic prescriptions as presented in much contemporary methodological guidance in the social sciences might not be appropriate. The determining factor in each article was the theme under consideration and the questions that the review sought to address.

Guzmán Valenzuela and colleagues lead off with a quantitative review that provides a broad-brush overview of publications in the journal over this period. This bibliometric analysis of all (3086) published articles from *Higher Education* from 1972 to 2020 shows in detail the pattern of ongoing growth in the annual number of published articles, with a particular uptick in the last 15 years, and an increasing prevalence of (mostly domestic) co-authorship and growth in female authorship. Geographic analysis of author countries

demonstrates that the historical dominance of the Anglophone world continues, and while there is significant growth in articles from China, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and most of Africa continue to be significantly absent in the contexts represented in journal articles. Guzmán Valenzuela's bibliometric review previews a recurring theme found across several articles in the issue, namely, that the contours of the field of study, as seen through the journal, are substantially shaped by cultural and political power of the USA and other wealthy Anglophone countries during the second half of the twentieth century and the first part of this one. But the articles also find that this Anglo-American dominance is not stable. China is a rising power in the world and an increasingly central contributor to the field of higher education studies. While many of the topics that attract scholars in the field today are like the topics of interest in the 1970s, the cultural and political context of the scholarly field is changing more rapidly.

The remainder of the articles then crisscrosses this landscape with surveys focusing on particular themes. Brankovic and Cantwell focus broadly on the notion of change, which can be said to be one of a handful of foci topics for the field of higher education studies, whether at the institutional level, within nation states, or transnationally. Their analysis shows the very pragmatic orientation that has been core to the genesis of the field—but then how the more academic inquiries quickly became the counterpart to this orientation, most notably because the goals of higher education have never been easily defined. That said, they argue that the field continues to operate on the borders of pragmatic intervention and academic explanation. On this point, Ashwin delves deeply to look at the way the educational purposes in relation to the education of students have been discussed in the journal. Ashwin notes a universalizing trend in these conceptions, which he critically assesses in relation to its level of fit to what is, in reality, an increasingly stratified system with highly contested social aims. Ashwin invites readers and future researchers alike to give attention to the educative purposes of higher education, which are often obscured interest in processes and outcomes.

This is not to suggest that social outcomes of education are inconsequential. Far from it. The field has long been interested in what higher education *does*. To that end, Deem, Case, and Nokkala survey the research in the journal focusing on higher education and social inequality. Across a wide range of geographic settings and in different time periods, higher education researchers have shown that expanding higher education does not lead in any straightforward way to a reduction of inequality—the topic remains prominent, contested, and highly unresolved. The means by which outcomes are produced is also of keen interest to the field. Research on teaching and learning has been a mainstay of the journal across its lifetime, and many of its most highly cited articles cover topics in this domain (Guzmán Valenzuela et al.). Ellis zooms in on this literature with a focus on innovation in teaching and learning, particularly in the context of dramatic changes that have been seen in the material objects that nowadays surround and support teaching and learning practices. In this regard, McKenna critically assesses the “hot-button” topic of plagiarism, showing that much of the present concerns here really stem from the increasing commodification of knowledge under neoliberal agendas—and that an adequate response to the phenomenon has to go way beyond policing student behavior.

The structure, politics, and political economy of higher education are addressed by several entries to the special issue. The role of higher education in relation to many facets of social, political, cultural, and economic life was expanded and consolidated over the course of the twentieth century. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, the place of higher education in the world may be shifting again. Sarrico brings our attention to doctoral education, showing that with dramatic expansion at this level, the purposes of doctoral

education have also been under pressure to shift. This analysis, which focuses on higher-income countries, points to the idea that as higher education expands, and changes in structure, the social role of higher education also shifts. Expansion of the doctorate beyond reproduction of the academic profession is a case in point, as demonstrated by Sarrico. Likewise, Shen and colleagues analyzes research on the international academic mobility of both faculty and students, showing how in this era of globalization growing mobility is inevitable and related to global patterns of knowledge generation. As with other contributions to the special issue, Shen and his colleagues reveal how the geopolitics of higher education are changing; Euro-American hegemony is fading fast. Horta takes up the question of how higher education contributes to the knowledge production and, especially, as it relates to economic innovation. While research is a prime mission of higher education, and development of the knowledge economy has prompted many governments to expect higher education to support national economies, Horta's review of scholarship complicates the relationship between academic research and innovation. Increasingly, Horta argues, limited trust in higher education pushes the sector away from a central position in the innovation system, potentially indicating the need to re-establish the bonds that tie universities to other parts of society and economy.

For a journal with a strong international outlook from its origins, a global perspective has not always been prominent, but rather emerged more strongly during the 1990s and 2000s. Several now classic papers published in the journal around the turn of the century remain influential to the scholarship today. To advance on work that theorizes global higher education, Marginson returns to the influential glonacal agency heuristic article that he co-authored with Gary Rhoades 20 years ago in this journal (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Theorizing the spatial dimensions of higher education, Marginson argues that global higher education is characterized by ontological openness and possibility, even as national and supranational structures impose discipline on actors in the field. Marginson demonstrates that scale—both physical and social—is undertheorized in higher education studies. Inadequate consideration of scale and the reliance on binaries such as local/global and national/international have stalled the field in making progress to better understanding the contemporary phenomenon of higher education. By foregrounding agency and ontological openness, Marginson's work is an appropriate launching point for considering what the journal might contribute prospectively. If structure is not, as Marginson argues, conclusively constitutive of agency, then scholars have perhaps more possibility to not only explain, but also influence, the future directions of higher education.

A research agenda for *Higher Education*

Each of the articles in this issue looks not only backwards, but also uses the analysis to point to important future directions for the field of higher education research. Here, we conclude with some major points that have surfaced. Each point might be considered a broad theme to which research can (and should) respond. While the field of study is not “steered” by any journal or editor, occasions like the 50th anniversary of *Higher Education* provide the opportunity to take stock of the field. The agenda outlined here reflects, at least partly, the collective insights of the special issue authors and of the myriad scholars whose work the articles of this issue are built upon. To put it another way, this is as much a responsive as it is a prescriptive set of priorities.

Our analyses have shown that the purposes of higher education have never been amenable to a straightforward consensus listing and that with ongoing changes and pressures, debates continue. A central issue continues to be related to the potential that higher education has for advancing equality, in societal contexts that are marked by (typically increasing) inequality. What might we learn from systems of high participation where further expansion at the undergraduate level is stalling but doctoral participation continues to grow? What systems of higher education are best suited to particular contexts and needs?

With all the focus on knowledge production in the contemporary age of highly competitive globalized science, a defining feature of higher education continues to be the more localized education of students. We would argue that here, as on other key topics, research in this journal needs to move beyond generic discourses to critically interrogate student learning outcomes and how these are best fostered in educational environments, the important role of teaching in a broader context which continues to denigrate this (costly) activity, as well as key decisions on what and whose knowledge is represented in the curriculum. At the same time as we are arguing for creative and critical work, we remain convinced that a significant strength of this journal has been its eclectic and agnostic stance and we trust that this can be maintained into its next 50 years.

Decentering Euro-American perspectives

The field likely requires a geopolitical and cultural re-centering to respond to and correct the bias of Eurocentrism. This journal always aimed to be at the vanguard of an international outlook on higher education, but arguably struggled to escape a Eurocentric/Anglophone perspective as a kind of norm from which other comparative analyses could be made. There is still a significant challenge for decentering the field to properly grasp the significant developments across the Global South. There is no single corrective to the Anglo-American and Eurocentric bias in the higher education (and more broadly social scientific) scholarship. One obvious part of a move to decenter European and North American perspectives is to broaden the inclusion of scholars who are working in the Global South and who are writing about higher education topics relevant to the Global South.

Broader inclusion of authors working in the Global South is a priority of the journal. While broader inclusion itself is important, it is not sufficient. *Higher Education* is committed to publishing high-quality research on a wide set of topics that are of broad concern to the field beyond Europe and the USA. The field needs to take up the problems presented by human geography and ecological change. Several articles in this special issue point to shifting geopolitical structures. Frameworks that assume fixed arrangements may not, in all cases, be well suited for explaining emerging problems. Introducing new conceptions is necessary to make sense of existing practices and how those practices may change in response to shifts in the natural and social world. The global climate is changing rapidly and will cause social turbulence that is at once unpredictable and inevitable. In large measure, higher education will be reactive, forced to respond to what comes. But not entirely so. Knowledge production, education, and the changes it provoke, even the choices made by higher education institutions, will influence the direction of things. Decentering Euro-American perspectives enables the field to adapt to the emerging world on terms at least partly determined by the field itself.

Examining the purposes of higher education.

At several points throughout, the articles in this special issue address the question of society's trust in higher education. Implicit are a cascading set of problems about the purposes of higher education. From the first issue of *Higher Education*, there has been an implicit assumption that government officials, in conjunction with professors and campus administrators, set the agenda for what higher education does and why. Governments that put public resources into higher education are assumed to want to get something out of it, and devise policy to steer the sector—now often from a distance—in directions that increase the probability of seeing expected returns. Academics, on the other hand, are assumed to be self-catering and cook according to their own tastes rather than to satisfy the appetites of their patrons. Both assumptions enjoy empirical support, but both assumptions also make big claims that deserve continued scrutiny. The idea that policymakers have clear notions about what they want from higher education, and that the said expectations are set rationally and independently, requires scrutiny. Likewise, while scholarly logics, perhaps especially those internal to disciplines, are undoubtedly orienting, academics are also extrinsically motivated. A list of higher education's purposes rolls off the tongue: workforce development and jobs, or knowledge, and human flourishing; innovation and economic growth, or discovery and universal truths; promote excellence by selecting students with most outstanding academic records into the highest value places; and promote upward social mobility and reduce inequality. The ricochet from application and concrete social expectation to abstract and metaphysical would seem to pit higher education's propertied purposes against themselves.

Higher education can and does peruse both intrinsic and instrumental goals. But what those are, how they are formed, change, and realized (or not) deserves continued investigation. Dispensing with old assumptions and engaging inductive elaboration could serve the field well. Research into the purposes of higher education is not an ethereal exercise. The expansion of mature higher education systems may be stalling. Some systems might even shrink. At the same time, doctoral education and the most advanced forms of education continue to grow in both absolute and (more quickly) relative terms. A system more intensively involved in advanced training relative to first-degree education will invariably need to renegotiate social relations and the networks in which it is embedded. Similarly, in lower income countries, higher education system expansion may not follow the path familiar to North America, Europe, and much of Asia, where large-scale multiversities tend to define higher education systems. The multiversity form is resource intensive and implies a type of system that is anchored by specific institutions rather than networks. Commitment to pre-existing static binaries to define higher education's purpose could limit the field's ability to understanding the sector's future development.

Social contexts of teaching and learning

Researchers in the field show consistent interest in problems emerging from the processes of teaching and learning. Literature on student engagement, learning outcomes, and classroom practices is voluminous. Because higher education studies encompass educational, philosophical, social, cultural, and management dimensions, the field is especially well suited to take on questions about the social contexts of teaching and learning. Assuming that education is a social as well as a cognitive process, one way to address the social

context of teaching and learning is by examining dynamics of power and control. Who creates and controls knowledge? Under what conditions does knowledge creation and dissemination occur? The idea that teachers possess knowledge that is transmitted to passive students has long been an out-of-date conception. But even dynamic views on the co-created knowledge through the processes of teaching and learning raise questions about what knowledge is and how it is assessed. Knowledge practices, including citation conventions, appeal to authority, the presentation of evidence, and determination of what constitutes established “facts” and “causes,” are all negotiated in a social context.

How the education mission fits into higher education institutional strategy and public policy, including the extent to which education is prioritized and how teaching is understood in relation to research, is dependent on the social contexts of teaching and learning. As is the often-vaunted relationship between teaching and research; what is actualized is always in specific organizational and cultural contexts. And with external expectations for student outcomes exerting pressure on higher education, the importance of understanding the relationship between learning environments and the success of individual and groups of students is heightened. The intrinsic value of education—education for its own sake—might be celebrated by scholars, but one needs not be a crass materialist to see also that understanding how teaching and learning occurs socially is a topic of some continued urgency for the field.

Conclusion

One thing is certain— not only will these preoccupations, and their evolutions and permutations, continue to obsess the field—but also successive waves of new scholars will emerge to tackle them. The marked expansion of contributions to the journal that has been a feature of the last decade can be expected to continue. Rebadged and newly defined problems will emerge, and we trust that new explanations and solutions will follow. It seems likely that these contributions will capture a larger range—in terms of education, culture, policy, and organizational practices—of experiences, interpretations, and insights. That is a core objective of the editors-in-chief and the larger editorial group of the journal. Through our broadening encounters with both the practical work of systems and institutions, and with other scholars, the field of higher education studies advances.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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